

Jorvik festival begins today

By Linda Laws
Community relations advisor

If you happen to be in the city of York next week, you might feel as if you have gone through a timewarp – backwards to the time 1,000 years ago when the Vikings ruled this part of England. Why? Well, from today - Feb. 16, the city holds its 12th Jorvik Viking Festival at various locations.

In 1985, the Jorvik Viking Centre was opened to the public with the idea that people should see history in an environment as close to what it would have been at the time. The old settlement of Jorvik lies beneath the busy streets of York, once the capital of the north.

The annual festival has grown each year from its small beginnings to become the large event it is now. It stems from the old "Jolablot," which was the name given to festivals celebrated at this time of year. In addition to involving many local people, the event attracts visitors from other parts of the United Kingdom and from countries overseas. The festivities include the Longships' Regatta, Viking feasts, Viking combat and a torch-lit procession and boat-burning finale on the River Ouse. The highlights will include the following, but there is much more to do and see during the week.

Longships' Regatta

The Longships' Regatta is Saturday. This event takes place on the River Ouse, one of the most important rivers from a navigational point of view in the whole of England. Incidentally, this is the same River Ouse which flows through

King's Lynn, Norfolk, just a few miles from RAF Lakenheath. Teams of rowers from all over the United Kingdom and Scandinavia – some of national and Olympic standard – take part in the event.

This year, there are three competitions: the first for serious rowers to decide the Championship Crew of 1997; the second for "fun" crews who compete for titles such as "most vocal crew," "most innovative costume," and the "festival spirit trophy" for the crew which best represents the Viking spirit. The final competition is specially for the Scandinavians who bring their longships all the way from Norway to take part in the festival racing. The winning team takes home the title of "Jari (lord) of the River."

In the middle of the day, there is a break in the racing schedule to enable the longships to unfurl their sails, bringing a real touch of Viking times to the river.

Viking procession, combat

The Viking warriors procession and combat is Feb. 15.

Probably one of the most exciting events of the festival is the sight of hundreds of Viking warriors descending upon the Eye of York, at the base of Clifford's Tower. Clifford's Tower is a castle keep dating back to the 13th century, set up by William I. Castle keeps are part of the fortifications systems used against enemies. There were two previous keeps on the site, both made from wood, one of which was burned down in 1190 and the second being destroyed in the great gale of 1228.

The day starts with a procession through the city streets on the way to the battle ground. On arrival at the battlefield, the warriors form up for battle, rank by rank. One such formation, called the "boar-snout and charge" is a typical Viking formation, so-called because the warriors arrange their fighting forces in the shape of a boar's snout before charging into their Saxon opponents.

Boat burning ceremony, finale

The Viking boat burning ceremony and fireworks finale is at 6 p.m. Feb. 15 at the River Ouse.

The Viking longship used in this ceremony is built by joiners from the City of York Workshop.

The ceremony starts with a procession of Vikings carry-



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ing their fire torches parading from Clifton to Marygate in the city, and then proceeding onto the river banks. The boat is tethered in the Ouse. The Viking archers come to the fore, ready to fire their flaming arrows into the boat.

As the arrows hit the sail, the boat begins to burn. After the boat has finished burning, a fireworks finale concludes the event.

Traditional craft fair

Throughout the festival, a traditional craft fair is held in the Merchant Adventurers Hall daily between 10 a.m. - 3 p.m. Exhibits include willow basket making, beekeeping products and candles, rune casting, pottery, leathercraft, jewellery, silverwork, toys and armour. Admission is £1 for adults and 50p for children.

York's other attractions

If you are not able to go during the Jorvik Viking Festival, York has a lot to offer visitors at any time of the year.

York Minster

The largest medieval church north of the Alps, built by Bishop Wilfred, is famous for its wealth of stained glass – most of which is original to the building. It was in A.D. 735 that the Pope upgraded York to an archbishopric, making it independent on Canterbury, Kent. In its history, there have been two fires, the first in A.D. 741 which destroyed it completely and the most recent in 1984 which caused extensive damage to the main transept.

The shambles

Today this quaint street of little shops belies its rather gruesome past. "Shambles" means a place where butchers used to do their business.

How to get there

York lies in the county of Yorkshire in the north of England. It can be reached easily from the A1 via the A64. From the base it takes about three hours, depending on the time of year and traffic conditions.

For further information on the festival, or York in general, call the York Tourism Bureau at (01904) 620557.

